DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 409 976 PS 025 115

AUTHOR Ollhoff, Jim; Ollhoff, Laurie
TITLE School-Age Care from the Perspective of Social Role Theory.
INSTITUTION Minnesota State Dept. of Children, Families, and Learning, St. Paul.
PUB DATE 96
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Caregiver Child Relationship; *Caregiver Role; *Child Caregivers; Elementary Education; Role Conflict; Role Perception; *Role Theory; *School Age Day Care
IDENTIFIERS *Caregiver Behavior; *Professionalism

ABSTRACT

Within the literature of social psychology, there exists a body of information that deals with role theory, defined as the expectations persons have at any given time and the norms that govern their behavior. This paper discusses role theory as it applies to school-age child caregivers and as part of the process of professionalism. "Role" is defined as a set of expectations that vary depending on the situation, with role norms indicating what actions and words are appropriate in different situations. When the role of school-age caregivers is considered that of a facilitator of positive development, every activity, game, or interaction is an opportunity to further children's development. The many different ways caregivers carry out this role are called functional tasks, and those include being a programmer, teacher, nurturer, discipliner, community worker, and administrator. Sub-roles define the expectations within each of the environments of the functional tasks. Roles are learned through a process called role acquisition, with effective contact and attentive observation of a model key to developing a new role. Role consensus occurs when a new role is acquired and others agree that behaviors are consistent with that role. Occasionally, role strain can occur. This is any felt difficulty meeting the requirements and expectations of a particular role. Several kinds of role strain are: role transition, role dissensus, role ambiguity, role overload, role conflict, and role-person merger. Social role theory can help school-age caregivers with role clarification. As this understanding grows, so will caregivers' proficiency. (TJQ)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 409 976

School-Age Care

from the perspective of

Social Role Theory

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
C. Hanson
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

PS 025115

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Introduction

Within the literature of social psychology, on the sociological side, there exists a body of information called *Role Theory* (Heiss, 1981). Role theory deals with the expectations we have at any given time, the norms that govern our behavior. Role theory talks about the different roles we play, as if we are actresses and actors in the larger drama called life.

Role theory can bring a lucidity to the issues of what school-age care is and is not. Role theory can help us discern what our tasks are, what our mission is, and can help us understand and articulate the critical service we perform in contemporary society.

As more and more members of the field discuss issues of role and purpose, we begin the process of professionalization. Part of professionalism is to understand with clarity and passion the unique part we play in the social network.

Definition of Role

Roles are *a set of expectations*. It is a belief, "this is what I must do." A university professor is expected to study, expected to know the discipline they teach, and perhaps be slightly absent-minded. An active member of an exercise club is expected to work out regularly and know how to use the machines. A politician is expected to put positive spin on whatever news swirls around him.

If we are playing with children on a playground, we will have a certain set of behaviors and vocabulary. We will climb the equipment, play a game of tag with the kids, and push one of the children on the swings. Many of those behaviors and speech would be inappropriate or unwelcome at a professional in-service training. It would be inappropriate to climb up on the table, to shout "you're it!" at the presenter, and then crouch down, hiding behind a colleague. The behaviors we are expected to maintain on the playground are different the the behaviors we are expected to maintain at the inservice. Roles are tied to social characteristics—we have different expectations whether we are on a playground, an inservice, or a shopping mall.

A role
is a set of
expectations.

Each of us have many roles—formal categories as well as informal. A formal category will be something others easily recognize as official: a school-age care-giver; a mother; a female; a student. Other roles are informal: a computer techie, a shy person, a body-builder, a hopeless romantic, etc. Each role has a set of expectations that go with it. Each of us have as many roles as we have sets of expectations—whether those expectations are from others or from ourself, formal or informal.

Our personhood is composed of many roles. One person, many roles. Each role we play has a different identity. We have as many identities as we have situations where different behaviors are expected from us. We play a different role for each identity we have.

If I were playing softball with the children during an outside time, and little Ryan throws a ball from the outfield in a perfect throw to second base, I might shout, "Good throw, Ryan!" If, later that afternoon, Ryan grabs a heavy book and flings it across the room, hitting a group of girls playing quietly, I instinctively know not to shout out, "Good throw, Ryan!" *Role norms* tell me what actions and words are appropriate in different situations.

In any situation, our role is our guiding principle, our integrating statement. Our role tells us what behavior is appropriate or inappropriate. Our understanding of our role will tell us what we should and shouldn't do or say.

When we enter a new situation, we immediately search to find our role. We look for verbal, but especially non-verbal cues to tell us what others expect of us. We try on a role, and refine it as cues continue to hone our perception of others' expectations. This is so automatic to us, we usually do it beneath the level of our own awareness.

Conversely, when a new person enters our group, we give them verbal and non-verbal cues to let them know their "position." Again, this is so natural to us it is done beneath the level of awareness.

Early social psychologists developed the concept of the looking-glass self. We see ourselves in the same way we believe others see us. According to this theory, we have no self-concept apart from the way we believe others see us.

Each of us is a person with many identities. Each identity is shaped by the social expectations of the particular group we are with at any given time. Each identity has a role, and role expectations. *Figure 1* is a sample of the role repertoire—or the whole set of roles that are part of the person.

Facilitator of Positive Development

We believe that the role of the school-age care-giver is to be a *facilitator of positive development*. Helping children on the road to positive development is our one and only role. SAC providers do nothing else but facilitate positive development in children. Every activity, every game, every interaction is an opportunity and an intentional avenue for children's positive development.

Frequently, we pick a game or activity simply because the kids like it. Or because it's easy. If we take our role seriously, we will pick activities because they aid in positive development. We pick a cooperative, high-touch game because it fosters group-ness. We decline to play musical chairs, because it fosters a combatitive, me-first attitude. If we take our role seriously, we make all our decisions based on whether they foster positive development. We are active agents in the child's life, providing a positive influence for each child.

"We believe that the role of the school-age care-giver is to be a facilitator of positive development."

Every decision we make is filtered through our understanding of who we are: a facilitator of positive development. It is our philosophical guiding image, as well as the tool with which we make decisions. It is our guiding principle, our purpose for being in child care. It is our *role*.

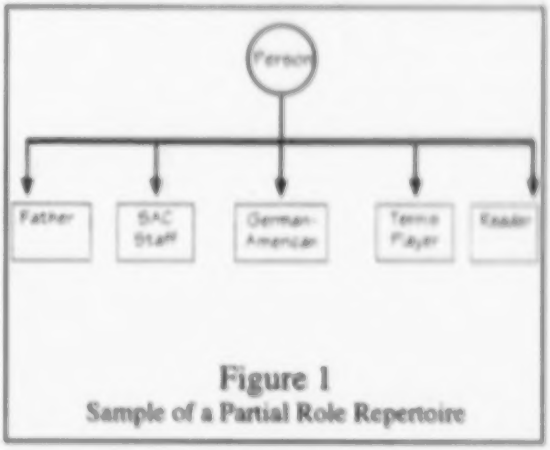

Figure 1
Sample of a Partial Role Repertoire

Functional Tasks

Our role is a facilitator of positive development. That is our role all the time, seven days a week, 365 days a year. It is all we do. We do nothing else.

However, we carry out that role in different ways. Sometimes we facilitate positive development by playing a particular kind of game. Sometimes we facilitate positive development by hiring a person who has particular gifts and characteristics. Sometimes we facilitate positive development by providing healthy snacks. Sometimes we facilitate positive development by teaching conflict resolution. Sometimes we facilitate positive development by playing with the children, modeling healthy play. Sometimes we facilitate positive development by referring troubled families to a particular community agency, for counseling or for financial help. Sometimes we facilitate healthy development by calling the police to move a victimized child from an abusive family.

The different ways we carry out the role are called **functional tasks**. For example, in a role of father, the person acts out that role in different ways at different times. Sometimes the father is a nurturer. Sometimes the father sets limits and disciplines. Sometimes the father earns money to help feed the family. Sometimes the father plays and recreates. All the different tasks together make up the role of father. We manifest our role in the form of concrete behaviors and actions—functional tasks.

It may be that school-age care providers have only six functional tasks, six different ways of manifesting their role.

The first task of the school-age care-giver is to be a *programmer*. It this task, we write schedules, plan activities, guide games, and play with children. We program the environment and participate in the activities that are part of the day.

The second functional task of the school-age care giver is a *teacher*. Particularly, the staff member is a teacher of social skills. Social skills are not learned in a classroom setting—they are learned more deeply in a group setting, when the skill is used and needed.

Sometimes the care-giver is a facilitator of positive development by *nurturing* children. A nurturer heals hurts, affirms and hugs, gives specific encouragements, and helps a child to use the unique gifts and talents with which they have been endowed.

We facilitate positive development in children by being a

- programmer
- teacher
- nurturer
- discipliner
- community networker and an
- administrator.

Sometimes the care-giver is a facilitator of positive development by *disciplining* children. The way we discipline has a profound effect on their growth. We know that children brought up with harsh discipline and punishment tend, with greater frequency than other children, to be rebellious, violent, and suffer mental illness and alcoholism. Children who grow up with lax discipline tend toward manipulation and difficulty with intimacy. Children disciplined with firm but negotiable boundaries, with use of natural and logical consequences, tend to develop self-discipline, responsibility, and an internal locus of control.

Another way that school-age care-givers manifest their role of facilitating positive development is by being a *community networker*. This includes supporting and encouraging par-

ents—by being the people to whom parents have entrusted their children, for care and socialization. This functional task also includes all the activities we do that are child advocacy in the community. There is a great need for child advocacy in the society today. Finally, this functional task also includes the actions we take in the community--to bring the program together. Partnerships with businesses, referring families to counselors, etc.

Some care-givers also have the task of *administrator*. This involves hiring, training, budgeting, billing, scheduling staff, setting policies and vision, etc.

All of these activities support the act of supporting children, and therefore, even indirectly, they facilitate positive development.

Together, the functional tasks together make up the role-set. We have one role, but carry out that role in many different ways. The role-set (figure 2) describes the many different ways we facilitate of positive development.

Role Acquisition

How do we learn our roles? How do we come to understand the role-norms for each role and role set? The answer to those questions is the process of role acquisition. Role acquisition, or occupational socialization, helps us understand how we come to understand who we are.

The most common way we learn behaviors and roles is through observation. Effective contact and attentive observation of a model is a key to develop a new role. When we were first socialized into the role of a school-age care-giver, a person or persons helped give us a role and a set of normative behaviors. It is worth thinking back to those first socialization experiences, and reflect. Who was your socializer? Did the socializer have a role you agree with now? Is the way they performed their job different than the way you perform your job? Why? What knowledge did you bring to the socialization experience? Are you now the mentor for someone else.

The economy of effort principle suggests that we would rather copy an old role than create a new role. Creating a new role is hard work, and it is much easier to copy an old role. What kinds of roles and functional tasks have you copied? Which do you need to create from scratch? New roles and functional tasks are created through observation, biographies, discussions, readings, reflections, and study.

"Every decision we make is filtered through our understanding of who we are: a facilitator of positive development. It is our guiding principle."

Role consensus occurs, then, when we have acquired the role, and everyone (or everyone who's opinion you care about) agrees that we are acting appropriately for that role.

Sometimes, however, there is not role consensus. A boss thinks we should be doing something else. Staff members make jokes and subtle statement like, "She's not doing her job." Perhaps a new person joins the staff and does not know how to do some of the tasks. These are examples of role strain. Role strain is any felt difficulty meeting the requirements and expectations of a particular role. Role strain can come from different sources, but all have to do with expectations, and the person's internal understanding of their own role.

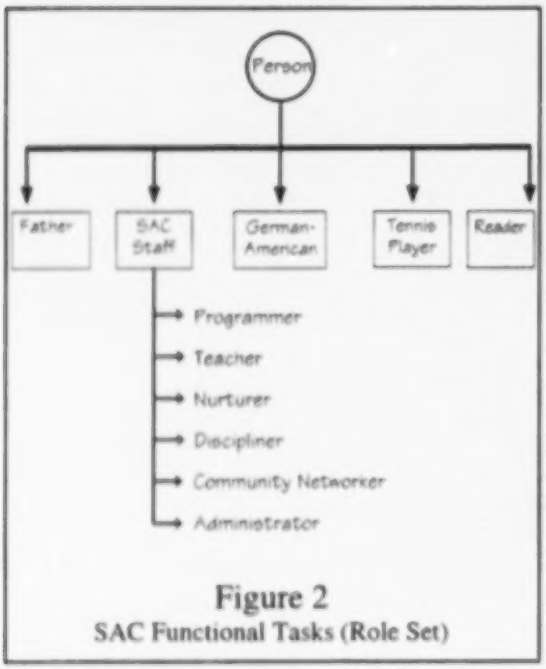

Figure 2
SAC Functional Tasks (Role Set)

Role Strain

There are many different kinds of role strain. It may be difficulty meeting expectations, or it may be a discomfort in trying to meet the goals of the role. Role strain always causes a felt difficulty, a certain amount of stress from the inability to do the role.

Role transition is the stress we feel any time we take on a new role. Taking a new job. Getting promoted. Graduating from high school or college. a divorce. We feel stress because of the new expectations we suddenly have to face.

When high school students graduate, there is usually an open house. Sociologists call that a ritual, or an anticipatory socialization event. It lets the community know that "now we expect different behaviors, attitudes, and values from you." The student is casting off the old role and putting on a new role. These rituals buffer the harmful effects of stress.

Another kind of role strain is *role dissensus*. This occurs when the way that we define a role is not the way others define our role. It may be that our supervisor believes that we should be doing these things, while we believe that those are not our task. It may be a quiet, disgruntled whisper among staff, saying, "Why is she doing this when she should be doing that?" Role dissensus happens anytime someone defines our job differently than we do.

Another type of role strain is *role ambiguity*. This happens when no one, including the staff person, knows exactly what to do. No one is entirely sure of appropriate behaviors, or expectations. No one is sure what outcomes are helpful for children. We are unsure if our behavior is helping or hindering positive development. We are not sure whether our job is to babysit, supervise, or concern ourself with social development. Role ambiguity is a result of ineffective occupational socialization, and this is a major problem in school-age care. Because we have no formal college preparatory program, and because most of us receive hideously little training before we begin our positions, we tend to wander around, grabbing on to the latest fad, or newest game. Because we have no role, we have no way to

"Role strain always causes a felt difficulty, a certain amount of stress from the inability to do the role."

evaluate the current trends or latest advice. Role ambiguity is probably one of the biggest reasons why we experience such high staff turnover. The "cure" for this type of role strain is study, reflection, and re-education.

Role overload is when there is simply too much to do—too many expectations, too many tasks for one person to do. Often this is "pilot error," brought on by ourselves as we set our sights too high. It may stem out of an inability to say "no," an inability to manage time and paperwork effectively, or it may be rooted in a belief that "I must do everything." While temporary and occasional overload is inevitable in any profession, if it is a permanent mode, it will breed bitterness and ill health.

Role conflict, another type of role strain, occurs when we have conflicting elements in our role repertoire. For example, our child care's open house is scheduled for the same day as our daughter's important softball game. Two different roles (child care staff and mother) have conflicting expectations. If the conflicts are occasional, they can be negotiated individually. If the conflicts occur frequently, then roles must be renegotiated and important priorities determined.

The final type of role strain is called *role-person merger*. We are each a person, with many roles. In role-person merger, the role of the child-care staff member begins to overshadow the rest of the roles. We become preoccupied with the child care even when we are not working. We begin to let our other responsibilities slide, because we are putting so much energy into our child care job. Finally, the role of the care provider and the person become merged: We have no other role in life except to do child care. From the perspective of social role theory, this is, ipso facto, burnout.

While there are several ways to deal with role strain, three ways are helpful and healthy. Role strain and the associated stress can be alleviated, but usually not eliminated. 1) Awareness and communication of our needs and priorities is crucial. 2) Negotiation of aberrant expectation is important in any kind of role strain. 3) Finally, building alliances and networks, within the organization and without, will provide various kinds of social support.

SUB-ROLES

Sub-roles describe the different environments in which we carry out our functional tasks. We may be a programer, but our actions and language will differ if we work with children or is we work with their parents. We may be a discipliner, but we discipline a kindergartner different than a 6th grader, and we disciple a habitual misbehaver differently than we discipline an accidental misbehaver. Sub-roles define the expectations within each of the environments of the functional tasks.

CONCLUSIONS

Social role theory can help us with role clarification—help us understand who we are. Research tells us that as our role clarification grows, the enjoyment of our tasks increase. As our understanding grows, and as our enjoyment grows, so will our proficiency.

Our role is a facilitator of positive development. It is an awesome task and a profound challenge. Whether we actually carry out that role will determine whether we have an influence on the next generation.

School-Age Care from the Perspective of Social Role Theory
Written by Jim and Laurie Olthoff.
© 1996 by the Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning,
School Age Child Care Initiative.

This edition of *School-Age Care from the Perspective of Social Role Theory*, has been made possible by a federally funded block grant administered by the MN Department of Children, Families, and Learning, SACC Initiative. Permission to reproduce parts of this manual is given for private and non-sale use. **Please credit source.** Additional copies of this manual are available from the authors.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is your understanding, in your own words, of the idea that the role of the SAC professional is to be a facilitator of positive development?

2. Reflecting back on your service in child care, how would you characterize your understanding of roles? Did you see yourself as a herder of children? A babysitter? How did your perception of your role change over the years? What changed those perceptions?

3. Who taught you the skills you have for child care?

4. Reflect on their training, expertise, and professionalism.

5. Since mentoring (observational learning) is the best way to learn the skills of child care, who might you seek out to mentor you?

6. Where else might you learn some skills for child care?

7. List the duties you perform in each of the functional tasks:
- Programmer
- Teacher
- Nurturer
- Discipliner
- Community networker
- Administrator

8. Are there any duties you have that don't fit in the areas?

9. What kind of role strain do you struggle with most often?

10. In what ways can you negotiate to alleviate that role strain? In what ways can you communicate? Build alliances?

11. Any other comments about the monograph?